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ABSTRACT

The author reviews literature supporting the importance of cooperative parent-teacher relationships for exceptional children and describes a graduate level course offered at Rhode Island College on behavior management for parents and teachers of exceptional children and youth with behavior problems. Both advantages and problems with offering a college course on behavior management for parents and teachers of exceptional children are considered, including that parents and teachers can explore their feelings about positive and negative parent-teacher conferences and that special administrative arrangements need to be made so parents and teachers can take the same course. A sample contract for an exceptional child is offered. (SBH)

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# COOPERATIVE PARENT-TEACHER STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS OF SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN: A COLLEGE WORKSHOP FOR PARENTS AND TEACHERS OF EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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The importance of cooperative parent-teacher relationships for exceptional children has recently received the attention it deserves (Clements & Alexander, 1975; Dembinski & Mauser, 1977; Fanning, 1977; Feldman, Byalick, & Rosedale, 1975; Flint, & Deloach, 1975; Kroth, 1978; McAfee & Vergason, 1979; McAleer, 1978). Federal and state regulations on handicapped children have emphasized the importance of parental involvement in planning, implementing, and evaluating individual education programs for children with special needs (Crawford, 1978; Marion, 1979). One aspect of parent-teacher communication which has received particular emphasis concerns cooperative management of behavioral problems (Becker, 1971; Haring & Phillips, 1962; Kelly, 1974; Kroth, 1977; Krumboltz & Krumboltz, 1972; Patterson & Gullion, 1968; Tharp & Wetzel, 1969).

Numerous studies in the literature demonstrate teachers' effectiveness in applying various behavior modification procedures to social and academic behaviors of exceptional children (Kazdin, 1975; MacMillan, 1973; Sulzer-Azaroff & Mayer, 1977; Wallace & Kauffman, 1978). Additionally, a considerable amount of research supports the efficacy of parent applications of behavior modification in home settings (Bailey, Wolf, & Phillips, 1970; Herbert & Baer, 1972; Johnson & Katz, 1973; Tharp & Wetzel, 1969).

Within the last few years, several writers have suggested the use of positive teacher notes in conjunction with parental communication as a strategy for increasing appropriate school behavior (Coloroso, 1976; Dickerson, Spellman, Larsen, & Tyler, 1973). Subsequent research has supported this tech-

nique with exceptional children (Hill, Imber, & Waterman, 1977; Hickey, Imber, & Ruggiero, 1979; Imber, Imber, & Rothstein, 1979; Jason, 1977). A series of studies by Imber et. al. demonstrated that while teachers could significantly improve elementary special needs students' performance on independent reading seatwork assignments, even greater progress occurred when parents provided additional systematic positive reinforcement to their children.

For the past several years, undergraduate and graduate students in special education have had the opportunity to take courses in behavior modification. In-service courses on the subject have been offered to regular and special education teachers in community settings. However, behavior management courses for parents of exceptional children are a much more recent phenomenon. Colleges have been slow to assume the responsibility for offering such courses, although shorter, more informal workshops are available.

A far more novel and potentially productive alternative arrangement is to offer a behavior management course for parents and teachers of exceptional children and youth. There are a number of advantages to this idea. In a number of cases, children and youth may display similar appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in school and home settings. By increasing parents' and teachers' awareness of the importance of consistency and systematic intervention the need for cooperative, knowledgeable management interventions becomes more obvious. Indeed, even if a child behaves differently in a home and school environment, the principles of behavior management are the

same. Specific applications of these principles may vary as a function of situational differences in tasks, structures, or consequences (Hewett & Taylor, 1980). In a more traditionally designed course, teachers may learn to apply their knowledge of behavior management principles to school and home settings through simulated role-playing activities. While such activities may be very helpful and far more enjoyable than more formalized instructional processes (e.g. lecture-discussion), direct interaction of teachers and parents within the same course experience provides a more realistic opportunity for both sets of participants to learn. Parents and teachers can also more directly explore their feelings about positive and negative parent-teacher conferences. Given the structure of a series of activities, parents and teachers can also cooperatively work towards improving their communication effectiveness for dealing with information-sharing and problem-solving interactions. The major advantage of offering a college course on behavior management for parents and teachers of exceptional children is that through commonly shared objectives (i.e. to assist special needs youngsters in achieving greater self control, independence, and responsible decision-making) both parties can cooperatively and directly apply their knowledge to an immediate problem, evaluate the effectiveness of their plan, and adjust the program, where necessary. In this manner, parents and teachers not only learn to utilize behavior management principles, they learn to work effectively with each other.

Before implementing a course on behavior management for parents and teachers, a realistic appraisal of potential disadvantages should be considered. One major problem is that parents of children with behavioral difficulties may not have had previous college coursework, or coursework in special education. While it may be very possible to teach such parents principles and applications of behavior management, their entry level of knowledge will probably be significantly lower than teachers who register for the same course. Another potential area of difficulty concerns the degree of openness that parents and teachers will feel when grouped together. Parents and teachers may feel very uncomfortable about expressing their negative experiences regarding school conferences or difficult behavior management situations with their children or students. Both parties might find it far easier to share genuine feelings with other parents or teachers, rather than with each other. Both parents and teachers may be concerned about the degree to which they will appear knowledgeable to each other. Such concerns may substantially inhibit communication rather than enhance it. The above considerations may require greater demands on the course instructor than would be the case if the participants were either parents or teachers. Greater emphasis would need to be placed on course individualization, grading, and communication aspects. Furthermore, special administrative arrangements may need to be made in order to allow parents and teachers to take the same course. Ideally, teachers should be able to earn college and program credit. Parents might be permitted to earn college credit if they

have previously met general college admission requirements. The issue of college credit for parents may prove to be a very complex concern; however, parents may be far more interested in gaining knowledge and experience in applying course concepts with their own children, than in earning a few quality points ! Another consideration relates to offering such a course at a convenient time for both parents and teachers. Parents may prefer or require evening classes, while teachers might desire to have afternoon classes after they finish teaching at school.

In spite of all the above mentioned problems (and undoubtedly some which were inadvertently omitted), the author believes that the advantages for offering such a course far outweigh the disadvantages. Therefore, he developed, implemented and evaluated a course on behavior management for parents and teachers of exceptional children and youth last summer at Rhode Island College. The course was offered at the graduate level for three credits, two-and-one half hours per day for three weeks. The course included topics pertaining to the following areas: developing appropriate social and academic tasks, structures, and expectations; communicating feelings and expectations to exceptional children; listening to parents and teachers; an overview of behavior modification; defining target behaviors; measuring behaviors from A to Z; developing new behaviors; maintaining behaviors; decreasing behaviors; modifying emotional responses; behavioral contracting, token economies, and group contingencies; ethical issues; towards childrens' self-control; parent-teacher

communication: reporting progress to parents; resolving parent-teacher differences; parent-teacher communication: a comprehensive plan. Course requirements were individualized for parents and teachers through a contract grading system. Course readings included references specifically assigned to parents or teachers as well as material required for both parties. A pretest was utilized to help the instructor assess each participant's prior knowledge of behavior modification. The results allowed each participant to compare his or her performance at the end of the course to an initial level of knowledge as measured by the pretest. Other course requirements for parents and teachers paralleled each other. Participants were required to apply principles of behavior modification to children or youth for whom they were responsible. Ideally, it was hoped that parents and teachers would collaborate by applying their knowledge to ameliorate behavioral problems of youngsters whose parents were enrolled in the course. Lectures, small and large group discussions, role-playing, observations of films and videotapes, and problem-solving activity groups were utilized.

Evaluation was achieved by assessing each participant's performance according to the level of contract selected by that participant. Although participants occasionally needed to revise their work, all members of the class earned the grade for which they elected to contract. Course participants evaluated the course using the College evaluation rating form as stimulating; participants indicated that they learned far more than in previous courses and gave the in-

structor "high marks" for teaching effectiveness.

Unfortunately, although parents of exceptional children expressed an interest in taking the course, when it was learned that a regular fee was required, the cost obscured their initial motivation; thus, the only parents who took the course were teachers of regular and exceptional children who were also parents. This year, the instructor is exploring funding for parents of exceptional children by the State Department of Education and other sources. Additionally, greater efforts are being made to make parents of children with learning and behavioral problems aware of the availability of the course.

In summary, it has been suggested here that colleges and universities include opportunities for parents and teachers of exceptional children and youth to simultaneously participate in courses on behavior management. Through such experiences, it is hoped that parents and teachers can learn to cooperatively address behavioral problems of special needs children.

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May 23, 1979

CONTRACT

Chris will accomplish the following goals to the best of his ability:

1. Accurately complete at least 80% of his independent work in language arts, (reading, spelling, etc.), mathematics, social studies, and science.

2. Follow classroom rules including:

a. when the teacher is giving directions, leading small group discussions, and when other students have been recognized to speak, he will not speak or otherwise interrupt the class;

b. during independent work time, Chris is to work quietly, completing his work during the period of time for which it is assigned;

c. Chris is to remain seated unless given permission by his teacher (s);

d. note-passing or receiving is to be avoided;

e. arguing with students or teachers about behavior is to be avoided;

f. teasing other students should be avoided;

g. Chris will keep his hands to himself.

CONDITIONS OF THE CONTRACT

1. When 80% of all independent seatwork in the above named areas is correctly completed, and when there have been no more than two violations of the above rules in each class, Chris will earn free time to quietly read a book, do cross-word puzzles, or other such activities;

2. Chris will also earn a special reward at home from his parents when he accomplishes the above conditions.

3. When Chris earns a special reward for four of five days, he will earn a special bonus reward on the weekend.

4. When Chris does not complete his work with a minimum of 80% accuracy in either classroom, he will be expected to complete it before the next day's class.

5. When Chris violates a class rule, he will be told what he is to be doing. A second violation of a class rule will result in his working in a "quiet corner" in the room. A third violation of any rule will result in Chris going to the office or other area designated by He will be expected to accurately complete his work before returning to his classroom.

6. When Chris further violates a class rule in either classroom, or in an office, he will be sent home. Chris will be given warning in the office before being sent home.

7. When Chris is sent home, he will be expected to complete any incomplete work with at least 80% accuracy, independently. He will then go to bed after supper.

8. On days when Chris does not accurately complete 80% or more of his classroom assignments and/or violates more than 2 rules per class period but is not sent home, he will neither earn a special reward, nor be sent to bed early. A daily checklist - note completed by or will be sent home each school day reporting the results of Chris' behavior to Chris and his parents.

Chris _____

_____

_____

Mrs. _____

Mr. _____

Mrs. _____

Dr. Imber _____

CHECKLIST NOTE

Mrs. _____

Results of Chris' behavior will be reported to Chris by _____ at 10:30 and 2:30 and by _____ at 12:00.

1. (80%) Chris has accurately completed _____% of his work today.

2. Chris has violated the following class rules:

warning quiet area office home

| Rule | Number of Violations 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. quiet during lessons | | | | |
| b. working quietly during independent work time | | | | |
| c. remaining seated | | | | |
| d. note-passing or receiving | | | | |
| e. arguing with teacherr/ students | | | | |
| f. teasing others | | | | |
| g. hands to oneself | | | | |

_____ Chris worked at his own desk all period

_____ Chris worked at the quiet corner

_____ Chris worked in a school office (outside his classroom)

SUMMARY

_____ Chris had a great day by 80% or better accuracy of work during assigned time with two rule violations or less.

_____ Chris had a fair day by 80% or better accuracy of work during the school day and/or with three violations of class rules.

_____ Chris had a poor day by less than 80% accuracy of assigned work and/or was sent home because of four rule violations.

COMMENTS:

## OVERALL SUMMARY

Chris had a GREAT great day by accurately completing at least 80% of his work with two rule violations or less in <u>each</u> room.

Chris had a FAIR day, by accurately completing 80% or better in either rooms by the end of the school day and/or violated rules a total of 5-6 times (except rule 2e).

Chris had a POOR day, accurately completing <u>less</u> than 80% of his assigned work before the end of the school day in either room (not finishing work) and/or violating rules a total of 7 times (sent home).